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JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC//J3/J4/J5//
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UNCLAS MONROVIA 000081

DAKAR FOR OFDA/WARO DAVIS
ACCRA FOR USAID/WARP
GENEVA FOR RMA AND NKYLOH
CONAKRY FOR POL AND USAID
FREETOWN FOR POL AND USAID
NAIROBI FOR OFDA/EARO
EUCOM FOR POLA/J3/J4/J5
BRUSSELS FOR USAID PLERNER
USUN FOR TMALY

DEPARTMENT FOR PRM, AF/W, IO
NSC FOR TSHORTLEY
USAID FOR USAID/A, AFR/AA, AFR/WA, AFR/SD, MAHARVEY
USAID FOR DCHA/OFDA GGOTTLIEB, CPRATT, CPRATT, ACONVERY, AFERRARA,
MBRENNAN, MLUTZ
USAID FOR DCHA/AA, DCHA/FFP, DCHA/OTI, DCHA/CMM

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: LIBERIA: DISASTER ADVISORY ON MOTH AND CATERPILLAR
INFESTATION IN BONG AND LOFA COUNTIES

1. SUMMARY: This is a DISASTER ALERT cable to report widespread infestation of crops by caterpillar moths (presumed by some to be 'army worms') in central and northern Liberia. The Liberian Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) announced January 20 a state of emergency in 50 villages of central Liberia as a result of the infestation. The caterpillars have destroyed crops, consumed vegetation and polluted water sources. MOA officials say the situation has worsened and the caterpillars are now moving towards western Liberia. The GOL has requested international assistance to fight the infestation. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) is assisting the MOA with genus and species analysis of the caterpillars in order to determine an appropriate mitigation response. Post will issue a DISASTER DECLARATION by septel requesting USAID/OFDA assistance. END SUMMARY.

2. On or about January 19, Bong County authorities reported that caterpillars had infested and deposited larvae over crops, trees, shrubs and some households, severely affecting at least five districts in central and northern Liberia. The MOA, in collaboration with the UN FAO, dispatched a team of experts January 21 to hand spray affected areas in an effort to contain the infestation. As the GOL and FAO struggle to fight the infestation and contain the spread, the MOA was trying to have a specimen examined in Ghana to determine the nature of the pests. No results yet have been reported.

3. Since the reported infestation, GOL authorities have held a series of daily emergency meetings, attended by UN agencies (FAO, UNICEF, UNMIL, UNDP, WHO, etc.), bilateral donors, and NGOs to provide updates on the response. Bong County Health workers from the Ministry of Health say the pests have destroyed food and cash crops, entered houses and contaminated water sources. In a radio interview yesterday, Bong County Supervisor reported that some 50,000 persons may be affected in three districts. MOH workers suggested that "thousands of people in the affected areas have fled their villages to seek refuge in the nearby towns," but UN

representatives monitoring the area could not confirm this assertion. The location of the infestation in Bong County is significant, because Bong is in the heart of Liberia's food-producing area, where much of the country's cassava, eddoes, plantains, bananas and potatoes are grown.

¶4. Efforts to identify the genus and species of the pest have not yet resulted in a definitive answer. An MOA entomologist said the caterpillars are wormlike and often brightly colored, hairy or spiny larva, approximately 1.5 inches long. The caterpillars multiply quickly, producing 500-1000 eggs per day and maturing in 2-3 days.

¶5. Attempts to control with available pesticides, burn or physically remove the pests have shown limited results. The caterpillars are reportedly too numerous, too ravenous, and many are holding up in tree foliage above 10 meters, suggesting that ground control efforts will have marginal results. Neighboring Guinea has also reported infestations, raising concern over the possibility of a wider infestation with major long-term effects on water and food supplies and agricultural livelihoods.

¶6. The U.S. Mission MDRO and agricultural/economic team of USAID are in constant touch with GOL officials and other donors to monitor developments and track responses. Thus far, international assistance has been limited to 50 handpumps and parts from UNICEF to repair and maintain deep groundwater supplies where possible. The FAO is assisting the MOA with efforts to identify the pest and devise spraying and protective measures. The UN has provided reconnaissance visits to the areas by NGOs and GOL officials from various ministries, but has not otherwise directly assisted with ground transport or well repair efforts.

¶7. Minister of Agriculture Christopher Toe declared on January 20 a "national disaster" in 19 towns and villages and requested international assistance. The MOA expanded the disaster declaration to over 50 villages on January 23. The Minister of Agriculture was joined by other ministers (Health, Interior) in this public appeal for support from donor partners and relief agencies to assist in confronting the challenges of the infestation.

¶8. A USG team plans to visit several affected sites over the next few days to make a first-hand assessment. Based on that assessment, Post will likely declare a disaster and request specific USAID/OFDA emergency assistance. Post has been in continued contact with OFDA's regional office in Dakar. The USG team will gather further information during the visit to the affected sites, and in consultation with the GOL and NGO partners who have an active presence in the Bong/Lofa communities, will develop an emergency relief response plan. Our request for OFDA assistance is likely to focus on 1) water treatment and sanitation, and 2) protective equipment for pest control activities in affected communities. Food security is also a concern over the long run.

THOMAS-GREENFIELD